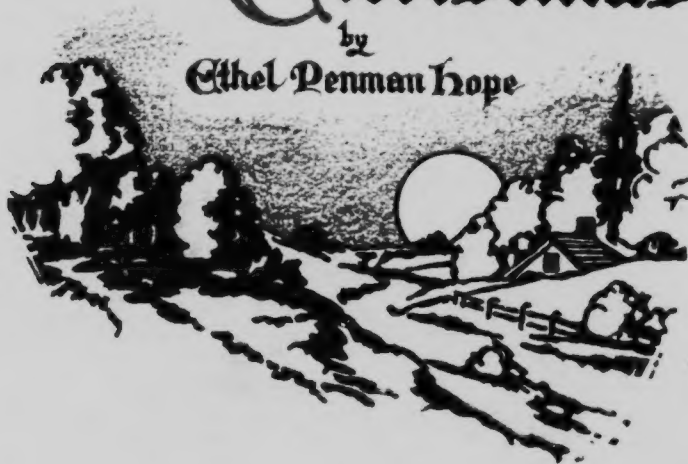


A Hillside Christmas

by
Ethel Penman Hope

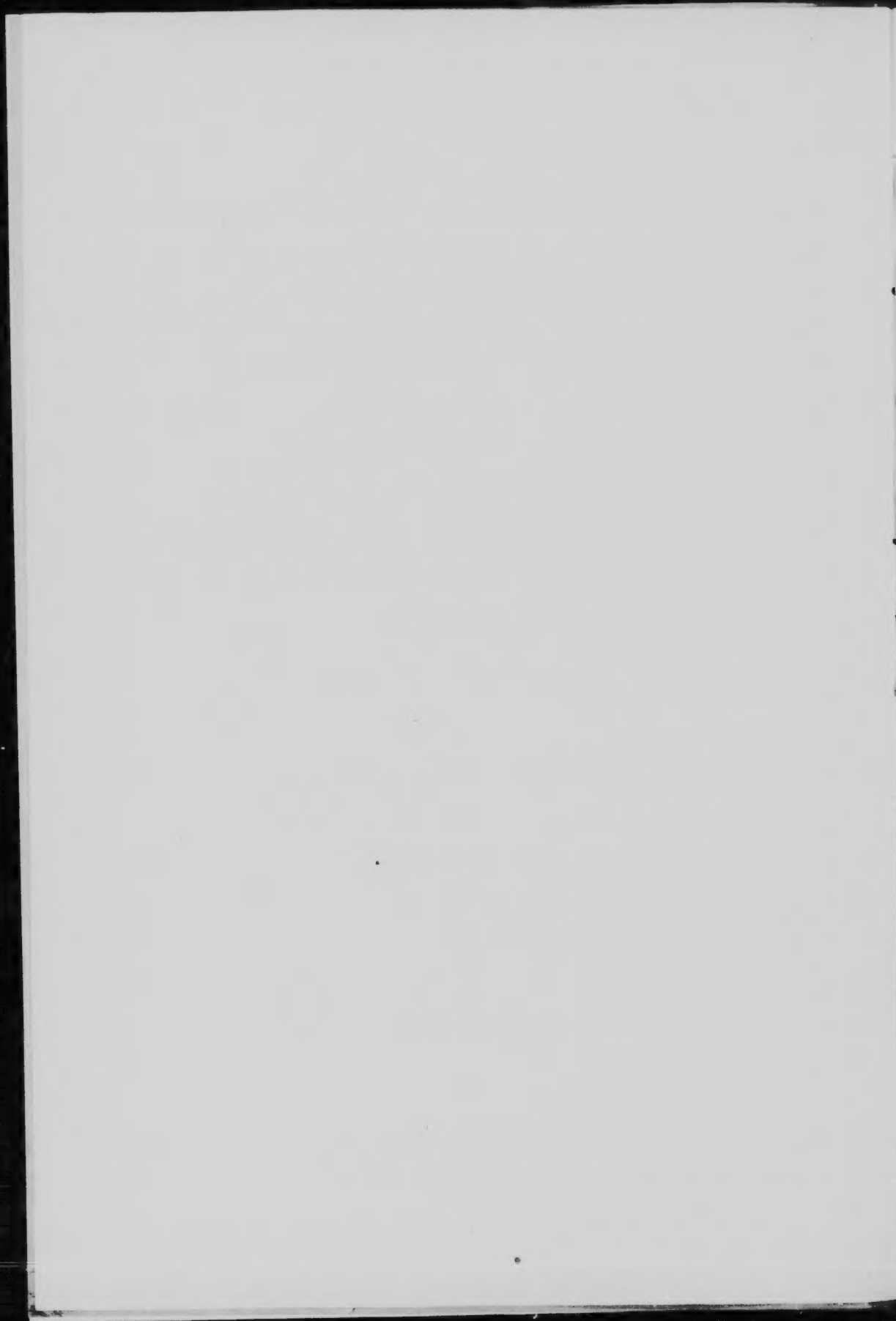


1841

1842

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A HILLSIDE CHRISTMAS



A
HILLSIDE
CHRISTMAS



THE STORY OF A
SMILING HEART

By
ETHEL PENMAN HOPE



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On the hillside a bit to the south of the village, a little, snug, white cottage nestled amidst the trees. In the winter it was sheltered from the cold winds; in the summer it was cheery and bright. There lived the Widow Goode. She was known to have a "warm heart," and because both her "home warmth" and "heart warmth" she shared with her neighbours, they called her "Neighbour Goode." Her hair was white as snow, and her face sweet to look upon, for she wore a smile not soon forgotten and blessed to remember. During the summer she tended her flowers, the stately, showy holly-hocks growing all around the low, white cottage, and next the garden fence, the mignonette. Then the beautiful roses, which were her special pride as they covered the arches, and all but hid the little green summerhouse. In the cold weather she

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knitted and tended her house duties, but was always and ever the friend of the village. If there was trouble, she was there. If there was sickness her kind hand ministered—always a neighbour in truth—Neighbour Goode.

And if she was loved by the village folk, she was surely loved by her two strong sons—each in his own way, to be sure, for the nature of each was so different. William, the elder—"Billy" she called him—was steady and true, a man every inch. Each night she thanked God for him, and prayed that he might be spared long to her. He was like the father whom God had called home long since. And John, handsome and headstrong, impulsive and weak to a fault. For him she prayed that God would strengthen him—strengthen him to master the evil that threatened so often to down him. Thanked God for his loving heart but prayed, oh, so earnestly, that he might be specially kept in the Master's sight, that no evil befall him.

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Now the flowers were dead in her garden—the winter had come. It was Christmas Eve, and Neighbour Goode lay sick, while the village folk with loving hands in turn ministered to her. When they thought she slept, and while they spoke softly, drawing the blind and closing the door, she travelled in memory back over the two years just gone. She lived again their sorrows, and felt again their pain, and in the dim light a tear trickled from the weary, closed eye-lids and dropped onto the pillow.

She turned back to the early days of the war, when Billy had grown thoughtful and sad; when she knew that he wanted to go but for her sake would not; when even in his smile she saw the sadness lurking. In the evenings, after reading the news, he would sit with his head in his hands thinking, perhaps praying—who knows? Then as she spoke, quickly smiling up into her wistful face and talking of other things, not in his heart in the least. Those were anxious, weary days, but she loved to dwell on them

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now, for they were the last of his days with her, and for that they were blessed.

Even care-free, reckless John became sobered, and grew more thoughtful and kind, when that evil she dreaded did not call so loud to him that her voice was not heard. But there were so many hard days intermixed with the kind ones, that her heart often bled because of him and for him. But in pride she remembered the day when Billy had spoken the thought he had, of his duty to God, to his country, and to her, in the war, and with his arms about her (ah, how well she remembered—she could feel them now) he had said: "He should fight for her. If the enemy ever should get to England—No, that must never be. He must go. He felt it. And those suffering women and children over there. He had always loved children (and with fond heart she remembered how the village children had taken his hand, and he had loved to frolic with them) and he must help to defend them."

When he was done, John had spoken and

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he spoke nobly—"You must go, Bill. I'll straighten up, I promise you. Here take my hand on it. Never again will I touch the stuff. You can trust me, I'll look after Mother," and he had put his arm about her and kissed her.

What a proud moment that had been for her, with the thought that her Billy would fight for her over there, and her John fight at home. But Billy would fight with an army of heroes beside him and John would fight alone. How she had prayed that God would be with him. And John had changed for awhile. How happy life had been then!

Billy had taken him at his word—had trusted him—and after placing the little he had saved in the bank for her, with his pay and counting on John for the rest he had enlisted—and now two years had gone by. As she thought of it now it seemed that she must have lived for those weekly letters from him, and to be able to send his weekly box—a pair of her own knit socks, some cookies (his favourites), some cheese, and often

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little personal things she knew he would need. And the letters she had written him—how cheerful she had tried to keep them, sometimes even making up a happy story to tell him in order to have him “feel good.” Always avoiding the truth about John—telling him she was well and happy, she and John together. Yes, she had lied about that, to keep his heart up. And when those dark days had come when food was restricted and so high in price, she had gone without, and as she pondered there her thoughts grew bitter again.

Why was there so little bread and so much beer?

Her poor weak John had forgotten his promise—he had fought, but his enemy did not fight in the open, and was allowed to roam at will, unrestricted, to attack one in the dark places. So her boy had fallen.

As she thought of those days she had to close her eyes tight to keep the tears back, and the thin, white hands on the coverlet clasped till they hurt, to smother the sob in

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her heart. Then—dare she think of that fearful day when they had carried him in and he had died in her arms, sober now, praying for God's and his mother's forgiveness, sorry and repentant at last, but too late.

The wound was too tender yet to ponder there, so she hurried on to still dark days when she had borne it all alone, too proud to let anyone know, spending nearly her all on Billy's box and on wool for his socks; all the time writing those cheerful letters, never telling him of John's death, nor of her position, fearing that if he knew he would return to her when his duty lay there. She was doing her bit of suffering, too, like the women and children over there, and she prided in that, she was making "her sacrifice" like her brave Billy.

She remembered one day, and smiled through her tears at the thought—how clever she had been—when one of her neighbours had called; a little suspicious, and wondering if all was well with her—she had robbed Billy's box to treat the visitor to

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"afternoon tea" just to "show her," and no one had known she went hungry.

And now his latest letters had been a bit queer, she thought. Could anything be the matter? But then this brave, proud, little Neighbour Goode knew, that down in the depths of her heart, underneath all her cheer and good words was a nameless, unspeakable dread which never left her except perhaps sometimes when she thought of, "Lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world."

She had pondered much on these words of the Master's during the past few weeks, just before the kind neighbours had discovered her, and had ministered to her. And now, on this Christmas Eve, her first Christmas alone, she lay in her snow white bed and rested. Her body rested, but her heart ached, and her soul yearned, and she was not comforted.

Christmas morning dawns. The bells in the village church ring out "Hark the

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herald angels sing, Peace on earth good will to men." Her heart is calmed and she prays that "peace may come to earth." Then in a little while she falls into a gentle sleep and dreams.

She is in France with her boy, where the shells are flying fast. She tramps through the cold wet trenches; she reaches out her hand and touches him. She climbs to his side then dashes across "No Man's Land" and sinks beside him where he falls. She lays his head on her breast, there, where the bullets are flying thick and the air is dense and heavy with smoke. She smooths his hair with her hand and kisses his brow, then yearningly presses him to her to shield him. Slowly her eyes are lifted and she beholds a figure in white kneeling beside her. The din of battle fades into far distance. The hurrying, shouting figures passing, vanish into the shadow. She can see but her wounded boy and the "white physician." "Lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world." He whispers while his

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loving hands he lays upon the bleeding wound.

"My Lord and my God," she breathes, while her soul bows in worship before Him.

Slowly the dream fades and Neighbour Goode, her eyes still closed, listens while the Christmas bells on the village church peal out clear, and yet clearer "Peace on earth. Good will toward men. Peace on earth. Good will toward men," and her soul rings on "Lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world." Then as she opens her eyes, her lips move "Even so. Come Lord Jesus."

Some one clasped her hands, (those thin, white, weary hands); someone bent lovingly over her, while his lips rested on her brow.

"Billy, my boy Billy."

"Mother" the strong man breathed while he held her close.

"But your side—the wound, Billy?"

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"Mother how did you know? It happened over a month ago."

"Ah, my boy," whispered Neighbour Goode as her loving hand touched the wounded side, "I knew for He told me—the white Physician who said, 'Lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world.' Did you hear Him, Billy, when He said that?"

"Yes, Mother and He brought peace to my heart. I have been in the hospital but did not tell you. I wanted to surprise you on Christmas morning. I did not want you to worry. But mother tell me all, and oh my dear, proud, brave, little mother, if I had only known about John. Why did you not tell me?"

"Now," said Neighbour Goode holding her boy's hands in hers, "I feel better. I am going to get well." You see, Billy, it's just been my hard headedness, my deceitful ways, trying to deceive the Lord—just as though I could. Here I've been worrying inside, day and night, boy, picturing you dead and

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keeping a smile on outside, always trying to be chirpy—and lying—Yes, Billy, I lied to you, but, oh! boy, my heart was breaking. I was rebellious, too, and not till I was laid low, and those Christmas bells rang out calming my heart did I grow peaceful a bit. Then, when the Lord got me quiet, He just took me over there and I went with you through it all, those terrible trenches, “No Man’s Land” and then Billy, I saw Him bringing peace to the hearts of men, healing their souls and I heard Him say “Lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world.”

The little room was very still. There was a strange, quiet joy on the mother’s face, while a tear rolled down the cheek of the strong man beside her.

“And about John?” he asked her almost in a whisper.

“I thought if you knew you would worry and come home to me, my boy, and I wanted you there even though I dreaded. I was proud to have you there, and that ‘Lo, I am

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with you always even unto the end' has comforted me about John. He is better with the Lord. He was forgiven."

Neighbour Goode clasped the hand of her son tighter, and drew his bowed head to her breast, while the village church bells rang out their message of cheer, into an aching, throbbing, suffering world—a message of hope—"Peace on earth, Good will toward men," and inter-ringing with this Christmas hope, the ever blessed assurance, "Lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world."

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